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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6838
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9497
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5327
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SUBJECT: THAI SOUTHERN UPDATE: GRISLY INCIDENTS, INTRIGUING
AL-JAZEERA INTERVIEW, INCREMENTAL PROGRESS ON TALKS

REF: BANGKOK 283 (ABHISIT RENEWS HDC CHANNEL)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

Summary and comment:

1. (S) Events in southern Thailand since January, particularly a recent spate of beheadings, bombings, and shootings, have caused some speculation in the Thai press and among south watchers that the nature of the insurgency may be changing, but we do not believe there have been any fundamental changes on the ground in Thailand's deep south. The al-Jazeera television network aired what it claimed to be the first interview with insurgent ground commanders associated with BRN-C, who have until now remained silent about their agenda. The Henri Dunant Centre (HDC) continues to facilitate discussions between militants and RTG representatives and is preparing a draft text to be used as the basis for future negotiations.

2. (S) Comment: The beheadings are troubling, but not new, and are not in themselves a sign of foreign involvement. Embassy contacts in both Bangkok and the deep south contend the grisly violence does not signal a change in the insurgency, but came as retribution for the alleged extrajudicial killings of several religious teachers/imams and could have also been intended to capture headlines ahead of the February 27 ASEAN Summit. While word that the HDC continues its efforts is encouraging, PM Abhisit's hesitancy to bring the military in as a partner in the effort underscores the fragility in the process and the potential for it to stall easily. Our next visit to the affected provinces is planned for March 17-19. End summary and comment.

A grisly start to 2009

3. (SBU) Security gains made by the RTG in the deep south during 2008, in which violent incidents dropped dramatically compared to 2007, appear to be slipping away, as analysts and south watchers grapple with the meaning of a particularly brutal series of killings. Eight people, both civilians and

soldiers, have been beheaded since February 2, when two paramilitary rangers were attacked while riding a motorcycle in the Yarang district of Pattani. The rangers, belonging to the 43rd Paramilitary Regiment, were shot, burned, and decapitated. Six more decapitations followed:

- A couple on their way to work in Yala,s Raman district was shot and killed on February 20. The male, Khomphet Chanyaloet, was beheaded;
- Two soldiers from the 2514th Infantry Company, Yala task force 15, were ambushed and beheaded while on patrol in Ban Nang Sata district, Yala province, also on February 20;
- Two civilians were shot and beheaded while working in a forest on February 25 in the Ra Ngae district of Narathiwat;
- A paramilitary ranger and his nephew were ambushed, shot, and killed in a separate February 25 attack in Narathiwat. The 21 year-old nephew was beheaded.

14. (SBU) Although commentators and analysts disagree on what precisely these killings portend for the insurgency in the deep South, there is broad consensus that violence will not go away soon, and that any security gains made by the military in 2008 may prove ephemeral. At least 55 people have been killed in 2009 though February 26. Yala Vice Governor Grisada Boonrach told us in early March that a forensic investigation of two of the beheading cases indicated that they were perpetrated by the same people; he said the report showed that the same guns and knives were used in each incident.

Shocking but not new - cycle of violence continues

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15. (C) The beheadings are not a new phenomena in southern Thailand. Press reports contend that there have been 47 since this phase of violence began in January 2004; our records indicate the last beheading prior to the recent rash in February was in September 2008. While one major newspaper called these killings proof of foreign involvement in the deep south, veteran south watchers do not believe they represent a major shift in the insurgency.

16. (C) Ayub Pathan, the former head of Isara News Service, told us during a trip to southern Thailand late in 2008 that the insurgents were keenly aware of the need to get into the headlines, and knew that they needed to commit spectacular crimes in order to gain visibility. Yala Vice Governor Grisada told us recently that he believed the beheadings were part of an attempt by militants to claim headlines while international attention was focused on Thailand for the ASEAN Summit. Grisada indicated security forces in Yala did not believe the recent dramatic events signalled an increase in violence or even a significant change in the situation, although he acknowledged the impact press reports about such killings have in Bangkok and abroad.

17. (C) Sunai Phasuk from Human Rights Watch and the HDC's Michael Vatikiotis separately characterized the beheadings as part of the usual cycle of violence in the south, and suggested they were retribution for a continuing campaign of alleged extrajudicial killings by unidentified security forces. In particular, both Sunai and Vatikiotis asserted the February 2 beheadings of two rangers was direct retaliation for the suspected extrajudicial killings of two Imams on the preceding two days. Sunai noted that both Imams had been suspected of being sympathetic to the insurgency; one had been previously arrested but released due to a lack of evidence.

BRN-C - on camera for the first time

18. (SBU) Al-Jazeera aired February 27 what it claimed to be an exclusive first-time interview with the BRN-C; there had been no previous attempts by insurgent groups or leaders to discuss either the insurgency or their principal demands. The Al-Jazeera reporter spoke to what were purportedly two BRN-C commanders - one outside of Thailand and one in a secret location in Narathiwat province at the site of a recent attack. In the interviews, the commanders claimed that the Thai state was forcing them use violence because of its discrimination against Malay-Muslims, justified attacking civilians and teachers because they were obstructions to their "revolution," and claimed they would not compromise in their fight for an independent state.

19. (C) HDC's Vatikiotis told DCM and PolCouns March 11 that the interviews were genuine; he knew the BRN-C commander interviewed in Jakarta, who had put the correspondent in touch with him as well. Vatikiotis said that Sweden-based PULO spokesman Kasturi had helped arrange and was present during the sessions, meant as a signal to the Thai government (RTG) not to ignore the movement. The Nation's Don Pathan, who has excellent contacts in the deep south and is in contact with Kasturi, separately told us the same, adding that Kasturi was trying to remain relevant to the issues at stake in southern Thailand and had launched a broad based effort to convince the BRN-C to work with PULO (reftel).

Still no unity among insurgents?

10. (S) Don said that he was not sure that the BRN-C militants on the ground would agree to work with Kasturi; many continue to regard PULO and the older leaders as having sold out. That said, there had been some coalescing of the insurgent movement. A group of "old" grass roots leaders still in the deep south, the "Selangor group," had decided to engage the young militants in an attempt to form a united

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front, while excluding exiled leaders like Kasturi, Don claimed. The older leaders were not involved in the current violence but were respected by the operational leaders because of their previous work organizing the BRN-C, and reorganizing the insurgency movement after the 1998 uprising was broken up through cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia, and because they had stayed in southern Thailand.

11. (S) Don said that members of this group had told him that they were trying to move away from the BRN-C label and were working to consolidate the independent younger operators and field commanders into a better organized group; they hoped a political front would emerge within 2 years. Don said they indicated they were having trouble getting the younger leaders to agree to a greater degree of organization and cooperation. Don claimed the Selangor group was not engaged with the HDC-facilitated channel/Vatikiotis (reftel).

HDC reports incremental progress

12. (S) Vatikiotis told DCM and PolCouns March 11 that he and HDC Director Martin Griffiths had good meetings March 10 with PM Abhisit, Privy Counselor Surayud and FM Kasit. Abhisit and Surayud stressed the need for any proposed compromise between the RTG and the militants to fit fully within the framework of the Thai Constitution, but agreed on the need for a high degree of local authority. Abhisit and Fourth Area Army Commander Pichet both agree on the need for Thai authorities to release one or two imprisoned former militant leaders as a sign of the RTG's sincerity, claimed Vatikiotis, but Abhisit said this would not be possible until violence was reduced first. Vatikiotis said that implementing the concepts of representation, participation, and responsibility would be key; he would steer the militants away from verbiage such as "autonomy" and "self-determination."

¶13. (S) In recent sessions in Jakarta the week of March 2, the militants produced a framework draft document with language and concepts that clearly showed that the militants had talked to GAM about the Aceh process, Vatikiotis noted. His job would be to shape the draft to ensure it could fit within the Thai legal structure; he hoped to have a working draft complete by the end of April. A group of eight southern Thai religious leaders, both from the official provincial Islamic structures and from private schools, had engaged the militants during a recent session in Jakarta, acting as a moderating force. Vatikiotis said that the religious leaders shared the ultimate goals of the militants but claimed that it would be possible to achieve them by working within the current Thai legal framework.

¶14. (S) Note: Despite the "green light" Vatikiotis said he received from PM Abhisit, the official mandate to engage in the HDC channel remains narrowly based. Abhisit expressed a desire to have the NSC resume its role in coordinating the HDC process, but that requires a change in the NSC SecGen; Abhisit told Vatikiotis that a change should occur by the end of March. The military apparently remains out of the loop for now, and Abhisit stressed to Vatikiotis the need for confidentiality until a workable deal is hammered out. For his part, Surayud suggested to Vatikiotis that the environment to roll out a deal will improve near the end of 2009.

JOHN